

## A Little Straight Essay On Work

Our society, our “state,” our “civilization” does not work. Something’s gone wrong with the damn thing. Nor does it rest, heaven forbid! It operates mechanically on certain major assumptions that dropped their meanings (meanings = Quality relation to their surroundings) quite a few decades back. The movement, as a consequence, has become increasingly circular, and the circles increasingly vicious.

Of these two definitions: WORK, 1. Exertion or effort directed to produce or accomplish something; and 2. Employment, as in some form of industry, esp. as a means of earning one’s livelihood, it is the latter, of course, that we must re-evaluate.

Livelihood: “means of maintaining life.” Philosophy professors carry us back always to the Athenians, and particularly to Aristotle, who said, “We work in order to have leisure.” Participation in the polis as a citizen required of a man [sic] that he be of the leisured class. Their word *anangke*, meaning “necessity” also signified “compulsion,” “duress” and violence, which was always understood to be present as long as one was under the pressure of necessity. Anyone under such duress was obviously unfree and therefore not fit to participate in the politics of the city.

The opposite view has increased only relatively recently to the point of moral hegemony (“self evidence”) in the West, beginning around the time of the Reformation and redoubling, with a heavy dose of moralization/violence during the Industrial Revolution: Labor Omnia Vincit: work conquers all. Looks like it has. Or, with clanking *anangke*, kommandant Rudolf Hoss’s motto *Arbeit Macht Frei* over the entrance arch to Auschwitz.

Work for factory bosses, no, owners, no, shareholders - in exchange for subsistence or less, that is. The “work ethic” was inscribed in the bodies of factory operatives, many of them children, by torture and molestation, a direct heritage of Protestantism’s grand figurehead, John Calvin, a sexual predator who “burned women with more zeal than the Catholics” (Pearce, 2002), recommending the death penalty for disobedient children. The issue of this fits Santayana’s definition of fanaticism: redoubling one’s effort when one has lost sight of one’s aim.

The second generation of human factory-units marched like zombies to their stations, all normal and natural. The hard reality of life. One generation’s torture is the next generation’s self-evidence.

Where could the rage and shame go then? The former into blue-collar violence and that of the more hidden white-collar, and the TV and movie vengeance market, including now the “real war” entertainment business, with lots of exciting real collateral damage; the latter into “pride in work.” The capitulation of victims over one generation created self-evidence. We’ve learned since Freud

that the “repetition compulsion” drives people to pass on repressed abuse trauma to whomever is subordinate to them, and that the “Fantasy Bond” will cause a baby chimp to leap and cling to the fur of a parent who is battering it, a child to vehemently defend a violent parent as fairytale-perfect, a society of people abused in their childhoods to support a tyrannical power-monger who will put the boots to them or the innocent and defenseless (or so they thought ‘til 9/11) all around the world - The “work ethic” has been part and parcel of the repetition, every word of the preacher and superior ringing in with the blows. The heavy hands of many fathers, that monotonous pendulum of terror, drove anangke another circle round in degradation, shame, “pride” and hate. Many mothers contributed, through the various subversive social arts, mockery, neglect, exclusion, and collaboration, as well as direct violence.

I myself launched out on the deep alternative tradition that abjures Labor Omnia Vincit, even in terms of our first definition. I prefer first to point out that this “work ethic” has become associated (appropriated) almost exclusively to commodity labor in the market system and its economic process. It has done so, of course, under false pretenses. As ruse, sleight-of-hand, *coup d’oeil*. The invisible hand, caught red-handed in the till, in the underwear of children, in the revelations on the battlefield: it reveals itself as your father’s, raised to inscribe commandments. That is the seal of the charters. That is the underhanded underwriter.

The leisure required for citizenship was embodied in an elite carried by human slavery in the ancient world, the Parthenon a palanquin; slavery an institution never morally questioned by Socrates, Aristotle, any of them. Even then, though, a pathological morality was rearing its eyeless head: when Moses asked Pharaoh to let his people go out of slavery to serve God in the desert, his reply was “You are lazy, nothing but lazy.”<sup>1</sup>

But “laziness,” good or bad, is not my primary concern, nor even that the morality of commodity labor as market-oriented social function is an obsolete morality; but that such a morality, and such work, is for the most part obscenely destructive.

Once upon a time, under conditions of real scarcity, the facts for many were toil and a short life. Warlords claimed a certain freedom by charisma, fear, fist, horse, weapon. Later, groups discovered that co-operation has a cumulative effect and can result in what Buckminster Fuller called synergy - the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, the chain that is stronger than its strongest link. Individual inventions were seen to have synergy when discovery augmented discovery. Finally the quantum-leap of industrialization that has become our hot potato. Our red hot endowment. Our white hot *cornucopia*.

In the early days of industrialization, workers conscientiously sabotaged looms by throwing in their wooden shoes (sabots). In the famous folk song, John Henry

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<sup>1</sup> . Those who rule the dominant institutions secure their power, in large measure, directly and indirectly by impressing their definitions of the situation upon those they rule, and if not usurping the whole of ideological space, still significantly limiting what is thought throughout the society. **Todd Gitlin, quoted by Ben Carniol in *Case Critical***

brought on a fatal heart attack competing with a steam-drill to be owned by a railroad baron. These are stories perhaps somewhat better known than that of the regular interference in the industrial machine by the calculating manager, to cause breakdowns in the regular flow of output. Even by the turn of the century, actual production apparatus was so efficient as to undermine the basis of the "science" of economics altogether - the assumption of scarcity. The... *imperative* of scarcity. The businesspeople built on the new foundation of abundance a superstructure of artificial scarcities - of credit, loans, and make-believe capitalizations - a paper economy. This paper structure of scarcity, says Robert Heilbroner, "was the constant disturbing, undoing, even conscious misdirection of the efforts of society to provision itself."<sup>2</sup>

Of all the scientists history has known, 90% are alive today. The curve of technological evolution is rising almost vertically beneath our feet. We are only just entering the age of applied science. A General Electric Vice President reports that of all the money spent by public and private sources for research and development in the USA since 1776 - \$100 billion in all, half was spent in the last 10 years (Heilbroner).

John Stuart Mill (1806-73) was the first to announce the simple fact that distribution obeyed no laws but human ones. Eventually, he believed, the profit motive would vanish as the facts of abundance become clearer, and people would turn from the struggle for gain to the pursuit of arts and life itself.

The now-famous Milgram experiments show glaringly the awful degree of obedience, deference to mock "archaic authority" obtaining in the "free" Western psyche - even unto the myth of efficiency, divorced now from any conscious end, fanatic, proliferating an old evil grown acute: the delivery of the individual's own critical intelligence and moral integrity to the teacher, the boss, the "expert," the company, the "state," Mom, Dad, Bart Simpson or Monty Python writers. The "free western psyche" hadn't a clue what freedom was, or why George Bernard Shaw said "disobedience is the rarest and most courageous of the virtues."

Every tree of life is guarded by a dragon, say the old myths. Brain researchers tell us that reptilian behaviour is repetitive, unthinking, and violent. "Crowding," wrote MC Long in a Science Digest article (Nov/Dec. 1980) "is conducive to aggression and combative behaviour... also increases the opportunities for unthinking, reptilian imitation." Adam Smith, theorist-father of old-time free-market capitalism, said that repetitive labor made workers "as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human being to become." George Bush: "We have known freedom's price. We have shown freedom's power. And in this great conflict, my fellow Americans, we will see freedom's victory." One more thing

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2 . In 1994, for example, the dollar value of all trading on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange will exceed \$200 trillion - eighty times the total sum traded on the New York Stock Exchange and six times the aggregate of all the world's gross national products. Each day, \$800 billion changes hands. You wouldn't need a big piece of that to make a living - a half a millionth of a percent (\$1 million a year) would do nicely.

**Ted Fishman, *Our Currency In Cyberspace*  
Harper's, 12/94**

need be added: We will one day experience freedom, and find something worthwhile to do with it.

"It would seem," writes Erich Fromm, "that the degree of destructiveness is proportionate to the degree to which the unfolding of a person's capacities is blocked." Because of blind acceptance of the old dinosaur game, "Dominance/Submission," the pre-industrial values of the marketing orientation, artificial scarcities of creativity, love, sex, joy, and self-esteem into which a multi-billion dollar annual advertising industry floods its meretricious counterfeits<sup>3</sup> to who can afford them, and millions of "therapist"-vultures, and big Pharma feast on the mass-produced human misery. The worker directs the power of his/her resentment (thwarted love) horizontally and downward, while (alas) coveting and cozening the acceptance of his/her masters, and the dream of becoming one. Nietzsche called it "slave mentality." Its perpetual motion machine the "monotonous pendulum of revenge," the resentient worker's reptilian circles expand in vicious instances: highway carnage, domestic violence, molestation, rape, drive-by shootings, McDonald's massacres, Jonestown massacres, Auschwitz massacres, Polytech massacres, Vietnams, Iraqs, Hiroshimas, 9/11's, Inquisitions, witch-burnings, crucifixions.

Our cultural heritage, industrial technology, takes the form of a giant getting to his feet, whose rising is plotted by the verticalizing technology curve.

So: if soldiers died for freedom, and we can talk of a free society and a free republic, why is there "no free lunch"? Lunch is not in the scarcity camp. It is, however, concrete and particular. Marx asserted that the value of a product is the amount of labor that went into it. Notwithstanding that by the late nineteen-forties the number of people in service jobs (in the US) exceeded the number making or handling goods, and that increasingly (obvious now in banks, insurance companies, corporate offices) machines now do the work of filing clerks, accountants, tellers, office managers, junior executives. Technology is entering the fields that had hitherto provided the great refuge for the displaced labor from farm and factory, now towering over the service sector with cheap robotics like a millennial tsunami about to break. Every artifact of culture models virtually thousands of years of labor, as well as innumerable hours of inspiration, Quality, the "dark leap into huge discovery."

The cost of most manufactured articles, due to mass production, in terms of human labor has been amortized along with millions of inventors known and unknown who contributed to our cultural heritage - humanity's capital at large - which includes an exponentially multiplying plethora of randomaccess information as well as hardware. What Fuller called the "industrial equation" renders the calculation of "value" in the Marxian sense untenable and unfathomable - it comes to us as grace - the gift of the ancestors, the millennial *donné* (the given); the long-prepared ground of our destiny. *That* free lunch. The first thing to be handed out from the Holy Grail.

To destroy our cultural heritage is as easy and as hard perhaps as clicking a mouse. We've been living in the unspeakable long shadow of a few trying to

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3 . J. C. Pearce: "First you induce the illness, then you sell the remedy."

hoard cornucopia; to privatize the Holy Grail. The price of that is too high to pay! But to plunge into the Armageddon of revaluing our values with respect to the ancestral synergetic grace of technology - to forge some new moral code, a leisure ethic and a play ethic and a love ethic, a plenteous, generous, celebratory ethic adequate to the burgeoning day and age - that is an opus vitae - an *otium vitae*: worthy work, worthy play. Free lunch from its chains, it wants to fly home to the pits of children's stomachs, loving each, however, wherever they grow.